

E-business Web Site Evaluation

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Web address: <http://www.compusa.com>

Overview

CompUSA is a brick and mortar seller of all manner of computer products, including hardware, software, accessories, storage media, and various entertainment-related technology products. Their physical offices are located at 14951 North Dallas Parkway, Dallas, Texas 75254. The company has been in operation for 21 years. It started out as a B2B operation, selling computer equipment directly to businesses. Eventually, retail stores were opened to serve business customers as well as end consumers. CompUSA acquired the ComputerCity stores in the late 1990s, and subsequently de-listed itself becoming a privately held company. CompUSA currently has over 200 retail stores in the US.

This website represents CompUSA's entry into e-business, geared primarily towards end consumers. A separate website designed for corporate customers is located at <http://www.compusabusiness.com>. CompUSA uses the electronic store model of B2C e-commerce for their website, to complement their traditional operations in their retail stores. The company sells to end consumers, all manner of businesses, educational institutions, and government agencies. Their profit is primarily derived from markup, with the addition of shipping fees on online orders.

General Impressions

I have been shopping in CompUSA stores for many years for computer related products. I used to go to their large clearance center in Deerfield Beach (South Florida) to get great deals on discontinued or out-of-box merchandise. However, up until a couple of years ago, I avoided their website because it failed to live up to the expectations I had in the company after frequenting their physical locations.

Like many savvy consumers, I expect a lot from the websites of large traditional retailers. Ostensibly, they have the resources available to create a unique and memorable online shopping experience. In some ways, CompUSA lives up to that expectation, but in others it used to fall flat on its face. They have corrected many of the missteps taken over the previous years and the website you see today is much improved over past versions.

In the past, the product catalog was difficult to search and browse, and search results were often fairly inaccurate. Prices never seemed to be correct, and sometimes didn't align with prices found in the CompUSA retail stores. Many pictures were missing, and the site provided an all-around unpleasant shopping experience. Today, all those negative characteristics are gone, and a wonderful site provides customers with a great online shopping experience, even if the font is sometimes too small and the pages too long.

One of the great features of CompUSA's site is their interactive circular. Online shoppers can view the current print specials that were advertised in the latest newspaper insert. Unfortunately, this feature is provided by an organization called Cross Media Services, and while it gives the appearance of being fully integrated with the main CompUSA site, it is plainly obvious that it is not as well integrated as we are led to believe. A customer cannot place an item listed in the circular directly in the online shopping cart, and if the link is followed to the item's listing in the main catalog, the price reverts to the standard catalog price. A printable shopping list can be produced from the circular, but items from the main product catalog cannot be added to the shopping list. See below in suggestions for improvement.

Suggestions for Improvement

The printable shopping list feature should be integrated with the full product catalog available off the main website. Customers should be able to place items from either the interactive circular or the product catalog in the list and have it print out. Also, prices from the circular specials should be ported to the main product catalog, so that customers can get the same in-store deals by shopping online. Of course, shipping and handling charges will still apply.

There should be some additional pictures and zoomed in images for each product where those images may be available. One picture view may not be enough to convince an online shopper to purchase.

The site designers should consider using larger fonts in the left menu bar, where the entire product catalog is always accessible by category and sub-category. This would also entail a reworking of the information provided on that menu bar, as a larger font would require the presentation of less information. Perhaps only the main product categories should be displayed, with other first-level categories appearing only when in a main category.

A few more animations might also be eye-catching. There was only one animated banner I could find. But, personally, I would stay away from Flash format animations, and not use any sound. Flash files and sound on websites only slows down the display and execution of a site, regardless of whether you are on a dial-up or broadband line.

Evaluation

	<i>Rating Comments</i>	
Performance and Usability Does the site load quickly and completely with a standard dial-up modem?	4	I have not been able to actually try it on a dial-up connection, but this assessment is based on the speed it downloaded on a 2.8Mb DSL line.
If the site requires the user to have a special plug-in or application (i.e. Flash, Acrobat files) does the site provide a link or help for installing the plug-in?		N/A No plug-ins required.
Is the home page well-organized and easy to read and understand?	7	Homepage organized in the usual right and then down pattern, following normal eye pattern, although slightly cluttered.
Are navigation choices clear and logical? Are they consistent and available on every page?	8	Breadcrumbs provided, uniform header, footer, and menu bars throughout
Is information organized in a logical and meaningful fashion? Can you find what you are looking for within three clicks?	9	Most things are very easily found, usually in no more than two clicks. This makes the homepage somewhat cluttered.
If a search engine is included in the site, does it provide quick, concise, and accurate results?	9	Search is very quick, although results are not that concise, being spread out over four categories.
If no search engine is provided, is there a site map?		N/A There is a search engine, but I could not find a site map. A site map should be included in any event.
Is the site free of broken or bad links or other error messages?	10	I did not encounter any errors or bad links during my recent visits
<i>Average</i>	7.8333	

Rating Comments

Web Design		
Are graphic files small enough to download quickly?	9	Yes, most graphics are not very large.
If screen elements, such as animated gifs and ticker tapes, are used, are they effective without being distracting?	8	Yes, the animations and tickers are within eyesight, but are not placed in a distracting manner.
Is there a balance between design and functionality?	10	Very good balance between design and functionality.
Do the pages fit completely within your browser, or do you need to scroll in order to see the entire page?	4	This is the one area where most websites fall down, and CompUSA falls right in with most sites. Pages are far too large, much longer than a 1024x768 screen.
Are the typefaces and font sizes easy to see and read?	8	Fonts are well chosen, but point-size is often much too small in order to cram as much information on the screen.
Does the site make good use of colors?	10	Color is used throughout to set off different page elements.
Does the site project a good image of the company?	9	A very positive image is projected, although the clutter that is often present may push some shoppers away.
<i>Average</i>	<i>8.2857</i>	

Rating Comments

Shopping Experience		
Is the site equally effective for the shopper who wishes to browse and for the one who wants to find an item and get out?	10	Effective for both browsers and quick shoppers.
Is the language clear, descriptive, concise, and easy to understand? Is it jargon-free? Is the general tone professional and friendly?	9	Language can be a bit jargo cluttered, although this is expected with the product line.
Is additional information provided to support the customer?	10	Extensive customer support information is spread over several pages, including terms, service, warranties, contacts, returns, shipping, and payments.
<i>Average</i>	<i>9.6667</i>	

Rating Comments

Catalog Organization		
Is the product catalog easy to access from the home page?	10	Extremely easy, which adds to the clutter of the homepage.
Are product categories easy to understand?	10	Clear-cut categories.
Is catalog information organized in a logical and meaningful fashion?	10	Broad categories to narrowed sub-categories organize products well.
Is the catalog easy to navigate?	10	Very easy navigation.
Is the product information useful and informative? Is it adequate? Does it encourage viewers to buy?	8	Product information is fairly detailed, although some details I was looking for were missing (later found missing details on mfg's site).
Are product photos provided? Do they download quickly?	9	Yes photos are provided and they download quickly, but no additional images or larger versions are available.
<i>Average</i>	<i>9.5</i>	

Rating Comments

Shopping-Cart Implementation		
Is the shopping cart easy to use and understand? Are shopping-cart features clearly explained to the consumer?	10	Shopping cart is easy-to-use and straightforward.
Can the customer easily add items to and delete items from the shopping cart?	10	Quantity adjust and remove link provided for each item.
When adding an item or items to your shopping cart, can the customer view the contents of the cart?	10	Contents of cart automatically displayed for customer when items added.
Is there an obvious click path to the check-out process?	9	Checkout button prominently displayed on shopping cart summary displayed after each item added, although the button is placed at the bottom of what could be a very long page.
Is product inventory/availability information provided?	10	Provided on each product detail page, including whether item is available for shipment or pick-up at the closest store location.
<i>Average</i>	<i>9.8</i>	

Rating Comments

Transaction Processing		
Does the site support secure credit card transactions? (If not, how payment is handled.)	10	Secure transactions.
Is the order form easy to understand and complete?	10	Straightforward order form.
Does the site indicate what it does with personal information about customers, if it is requested?		Privacy policy available from footer bar of each page.
Are payments processed in real time?	10	Credit card payments are processed immediately for shipment orders, while pick-up orders are merely held with a credit card number.
Is the transaction completed quickly?	10	Fast transaction.
Is adequate information provided as confirmation of a successfully completed transaction?	10	Confirmation page is displayed, and confirmation email is sent upon order processing.
Is there a follow-up e-mail confirmation?	10	Follow-ups are sent after order shipping.
<i>Average</i>	<i>10</i>	

Rating Comments

Customer Service		
Does the site have a privacy policy? If yes, is it easily accessible from the home page? Is it accessible from other areas of the site that ask customers for personal information?	10	Privacy policy available from footer bar of each page.
Does the site clearly explain shipping and handling procedures? Return policies? Product or service guarantees?	10	Shipping policy and order information displayed on the terms page, available from footer bar on any page.
Does the site provide contact information for customers who prefer to order offline or for use in the event of technical or other problems?	9	Orders are only accepted online, but the customer can always go to his or her nearest retail location.
Does the site allow international orders?	10	International orders accepted.
Does the site have a separate customer-service section or clearly labeled customer-service information?	8	Customer service information is available on the Terms page, accessible from the footer bar of any page.
Does the site allow users to track orders and account activity?	10	Yes order status and account management is easily accessible from the header bar of any page.
Does the site make it easy for you to provide feedback/comments?	10	Customer service link provided at top right corner of the header bar of each page allows easy communication methods with the company.
Does the site provide a forum/chat feature? Does it appear to support the primary purpose of the site?	6	No forum or chat is provided, and this would be a very good idea.
Does the site give customers the opportunity to subscribe/unsubscribe to e-mail alerts or mailing-list discussions?	9	Yes, the email list subscription is available from advertised products page.
Does the site offer other value-added features?	10	Gift certificates, store locator, in-store pick-up repair and maintenance scheduling, online auctions, communications services, interactive circulars.
Is the customer experience quick and easy enough to bring the customer back, and keep him or her from going to competitors?	9	Very straightforward shopping experience provided.
<i>Average</i>	<i>9.1818</i>	

Overall Average

9.18